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THE PINTER PLAY: WHERE IT HAPPENS

By

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B.A., College of Great Falls, 1967


Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of

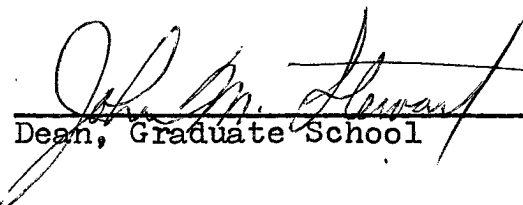
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INTRODUCTION

"Finding the characters and letting them speak for themselves is the great excitement of writing . . . I find out what they are doing, allow them to do it, and keep out of it. Then it is up to the audience to decide how much is truth and how much is lies."¹

Harold Pinter's short statement on his own dramaturgy hints at the unique dramatic habitation of the Pinter play as well as at the role of the audience which apprehends it. The statement implies both association and dissociation of playwright and play as well as an audience participation beyond mere assimilation of the play.

To ascertain the kind and degree of aesthetic association/dissociation of the playwright and the kind and degree of audience participation required by the Pinter theater is to discover where the Pinter play "happens": on what dramatic plane, in what kind of audience response.

An examination of the information structure employed in the Pinter play as it concords and contrasts with the information structure in traditional drama, in modern Happenings, and in the plays of a contemporary British playwright, John Arden, followed by an analysis of Pinter's use of words and symbols should begin to define

the dramatic plane of the Pinter play.

The questions then arise: What world has been created by Pinter's dramatic union of words, symbols, and information? What, in Pinter's theater, is real, what theatrical? To what specific dramatic ideas or conventions do the Pinter plays relate or not relate?

Finally, to what in the Pinter play does the audience respond, and how?

CHAPTER I

PINTER'S INFORMATION STRUCTURE

Traditional theater is strongly directed. That is, the playwright, through a complex information structure, through elements of cause and effect, through sequential plot and (perhaps psychologically) motivated characters maintains a strong control over the audience. Traditional theater happens in the mind of the playwright, primarily, and the degree of audience participation beyond mere assimilation of the play is minimal.

In contrast to traditional theater, modern Happenings are non-directed. Audience participation in some cases becomes the Happening. In other cases the audience creates the Happening for itself emotionally and intellectually in the way that a small boy creates his own experience at a three-ring circus. The playwright presents images but does not suggest either connections or conclusions.

Approximately halfway between traditional theater and the modern Happening is the partially-directed play exemplified by the drama of John Arden. Though Arden's plays deal with such social problems as prostitution, ethics in government, violence, and old age, Arden suggests

the ambiguous connections between the problems and his characters rather than presents conclusions. He "refrains from limiting his characterizations of individuals in any way to fit them into some general thesis."²

In The Happy Haven Arden's Mrs. Phineus says

I'm an old old lady
And I don't have long to live.
I'm only strong enough to take
Not to give. No time left to give.
I want to drink, I want to eat,
I want my shoes taken off my feet.
I want to talk but not to walk
Because if I walk, I have to know
Where it is I want to go.
I want to sleep but not to dream
I want to play and win every game
To live with love but not to love
The world to move but me not to move
I want I want for ever and ever
The world to work, the world to be clever.
Leave me be, but don't leave me alone.
That's what I want. I'm a big round stone
Sitting in the middle of a thunderstorm . . .³

and Arden's audience, like Mrs. Phineus, is a big round stone sitting in the middle of a thunderstorm. It does not know whether to approve or disapprove of this ambivalent octogenarian because Arden himself does neither. He simply allows her to exist, selfish in her loneliness, lonely in her selfishness, and the audience cannot, through any help from Arden, define and, thus, dismiss her.

Arden's introductory note to his ribald and brawling Live Like Pigs, which contrasts the chaotic life of the nomadic Sawneys newly moved into a British Council Estate (government housing development) and the very proper and decent life of the lower middle class Jacksons who live

next door, explains his failure to "choose sides" as being inherent in his own personality as well as in his dramatic philosophy: "I approve outright neither of the Sawneys nor of the Jacksons. Both groups uphold standards of conduct that are incompatible, but which are both valid in their correct context."⁴

Pinter, like Arden, inherently distrusts simplifications (taking sides). "I'm against all propaganda," he told Charles Marowitz in 1967, "Even propaganda for life."⁵ "Pinter's realism," John Lahr says in The Drama Review, Winter, 1968, "refuses to offer bromidic meanings or strained coherence to palliate forces beyond our comprehension."⁶

Pinter, like Arden, detaches himself, didactically, from his own drama, refuses to comment upon or take sides in the controversies rendered, demands from his audience a degree of participation beyond mere assimilation of the play and refuses to direct that participation with theses.

It would seem, then, that the Pinter play has a local habitation near the plays of Arden, approximately midway between traditional drama and Happenings. One has only to read or see any one of Arden's socially-oriented plays such as Live Like Pigs, The Happy Haven, or The Waters of Babylon, and contrast it with an early play of Pinter's, The Birthday Party, to know that the plays of Pinter and Arden not only do not demand the same kind of

audience participation but happen in opposing worlds.

The scene of Live Like Pigs is the inside and immediate outer vicinity of the Sawney residence in a British government housing development. The usual kind of official appears to investigate the usual kind of neighborhood complaint against lower class invaders: noise, dirt, and general disorder. The Sawneys are guilty of all three, and the Sergeant tells them (rather unfairly, since their boy has been "nearly gelded" by "law-abiding" neighbors): "You're now living in a law-abiding neighborhood. Least, it has been for the last year or two, once the folk got settled down; and we don't want your lot stirring it up again."⁷

But what is the complaint against Stanley Webber in The Birthday Party? What sort of officials are Goldberg and McCann? Whom or what do they represent? The answers to these questions are not as important as determining who answers them with what kind of information given in what form.

Traditional theater employs an information structure in which both visual (the set, the lights, the expressions and movements of the actors) and verbal aspects convey to the audience the situation, the identity of the characters, what is happening and what might happen. Information is needed by the audience in order that it might "follow" the play, "apprehend" its meaning.⁸

The information given by the playwright in a traditional play is essentially cumulative. Although exposition is conventionally placed early in the play, additional information is provided by each part of the play which serves to clarify, reflexively, material that has already been presented.⁹

Thus, traditional theater is a direction by the playwright to the audience toward a particular understanding of the characters and events.

In contrast to traditional theater, Happenings give no cumulative information to the audience as no information is passed from one unit or compartment of a Happening to another, though there is an overall unity exemplified by a symphony whose separate movements may have great formal differences.⁷

Information in a Pinter play, never completely directional as in traditional theater, is often, as in a Happening, simply there. Moreover, Pinter views with alarm the too-articulate presentation of information: "A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experiences, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives, is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression."¹¹

Stanley Webber, in The Birthday Party, seems to be a failed musician with a glorious past, then, one line later, to be simply a failed musician: "Played the piano? I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country." (Pause.) I once gave a concert."¹² His father, he believes, nearly came down to hear his concert: "Well, I dropped him a card anyway. But I don't think he could make it. No, I--I lost the address that was it."¹³ Plainly, Pinter's character presents no conclusive information as to his past experiences.

When Goldberg and McCann, two characters in some way (Pinter does not explain how) involved in Stanley's past, appear on the scene, the audience finds itself knowing less than it thought it knew about Stanley. Not only does Pinter refuse to reveal enlightening information, but he employs a reverse kind of dramatic irony in which the characters, who know little enough about themselves, seem to know slightly more than the audience knows.

Stanley's premonitions concerning Goldberg and McCann, for instance, seem paranoid to the audience, until, in Act Two, their horrible inquisition/denunciation of Stanley begins: "Why are you wasting everybody's time, Webber? Why are you getting in everybody's way?"¹⁴ "Who are you, Webber? What makes you think you exist? You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice

in you. You're nothing but an odour!"¹⁵

Richard Schechner, in Tulane Drama Review, Winter 1966, declares that Pinter's "refusal to reveal information seems strange to us because, since Ibsen, we have become accustomed to knowing all either sooner or later." He goes on to say that "Pinter intentionally disappoints our expectations (of discovering what it's all about) and leaves his audience anxiously confused."¹⁶ Pinter, Schechner says, substitutes for information something Henry James asserted: "Only make the reader's general vision intense . . . and his own experience, his own imagination . . . will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him think the evil, make him think it for himself."¹⁷

The audience, then, in the Pinter play, supplies the particulars. The playwright gives emotional and experiential directions only and these in ambiguous form. While John Arden directs his audience response with facts rather than theses, Pinter directs with neither facts nor theses but with impressions.

Although information in a Pinter play exists in an impressionistic, contextual form rather than the traditional linear form, although Pinter seems to abandon plot structure, a clear relationship between cause and effect, and sequential elements of traditional drama, the Pinter play is not a Happening as The Homecoming is

categorized by a blurb in The New Yorker.¹⁸

Two characteristics of Happenings preclude the Pinter play being placed in that category: non-interaction of characters and creative freedom of actors.

Interaction of characters is a primary theme in The Caretaker, which demonstrates, according to Julius Novick in Beyond Broadway, "that in any group of three people, there are three possible combinations whereby two of them can gang up on the third; a theme that would seem, considering human nature, to be of permanent importance."¹⁹ Characters in Happenings perform their roles like stagehands moving props and furniture between acts of a play in sight of the audience, without relationship to each other, without interpretation of character or meaning.²⁰

Although Happenings are not improvised, as is commonly supposed, but are composed and prepared in rehearsal, the actors in Happenings do have a high degree of physical freedom. Pinter quite violently opposes the "anarchic theatre of so-called 'creative' actors," insists that the "actors can do that in someone else's plays."²¹

Pinter's view of the actor coincides with the monism of Stanislavski: the performer should be unseen within his character, should be the character. (In Brechtian theater, conversely, the performer should be perceived simultaneously with the character so that one can comment upon the other.) In Happenings, there is no

use of character (or time or place) and no use of the performer's comments.²²

Pinter's use of interacting characters and non-creative actors as conveyors of information separates his theater from the theater of the modern Happening; his abandonment of the linear plot involving cumulative and enlightening or didactic information separates it from traditional theater; his use of impressionistic rather than factual information separates his plays from the plays of John Arden.

It is clear, however, that the dramatic plane of the Pinter play does not exist in a vacuum but touches upon the planes of these three in several organic ways.

CHAPTER II

WORDS AND SYMBOLS IN THE PINTER PLAY

Pinter's atypical verbalization and his alogical use of symbols, both of which necessitate (and effect) profound emotional and intellectual participation of the audience, suggest the unique dramatic plane of the Pinter play.

"Pinter finds the language of music the easiest way to describe his own understanding of his plays," John Lahr explains. In 1967 Pinter told Lahr:

I am very conscious of rhythm. It's got to happen "Snap. Snap"--just like that or it's wrong. I'm also interested in pitch . . . I remember when we did The Collection on Off-Broadway a few years ago, there was an American actor who was in big trouble with his part. I told him instead of trying to find reasons for his characterization, "Why don't you read the part and pay attention to the stress of the words." He did it and he was fine. The point is the stresses tell you what the meaning is.²³

The Pinter play employs both silence and rhythm in a way that produces an orchestration of meaning rather than the usual logical presentation. Words are used for their shape and their emanations as well as for their sensible and direct meanings, which often turn in and upon each other until they, too, are a part of the emanations received by the audience. The relationship between word and meaning is never direct in the Pinter play.

Andrew Kennedy believes the counterpoint of speech rhythms in Pinter has become, very nearly, an end in itself. He predicts that "allowing for the element of irreducible humanity in speech, Pinter may yet come so near to 'music' in his dialogue as to be heading for abstraction."²⁴

Although Kennedy deplores (as limiting) the trend toward what he calls mere "word-play" (as exemplified by Pinter) in the new English drama,²⁵ poetry (not necessarily in verse) is a traditional element of drama. In the seventeenth century a playwright was referred to as "the poet."²⁶

Words employed partly or even mostly for the sake of their sound are essential to the Pinter play. Pinter's situations transcend the capacity of prose and occupy that "frontier of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist" T.S. Eliot described in "The Music of Poetry."²⁷

The failure of Pinter's words to convey precise meanings, to define character, to explain situations, is an artistic triumph. It is this failure which relates the plays to life (chaos, fragmented experience, uncertainty) and to the theater. It is this failure which reminds the audience it is watching a play and not "observing life" as if "life" were a "scene" and the audience the voyeur.

Pinter's words present to his audience no clear conceptualization of life, but rather a conceptual

incompleteness. Richard Schechner defines the matrices out of which the plays emerge:

The "conceptual world" out of which the plays emerge is sparse, fragmented . . . past experience is brought into focus only with great difficulty, and then often in self-contradictory ways. The audience is left to supply whatever conceptual framework it can, but no single rational frame will answer all the questions. Stanley is pursued and captured by McCann and Goldberg . . . and we really don't know why . . . no Ibsenite "secret revealed" ties the loose ends together. The plays--as aesthetic entities--are completed but the conceptual matrices out of which the action arises are left gaping.²⁸

Rose asks Mr. Kidd, the landlord in The Room, a simple question: "How many floors you got in this house?"²⁹ In traditional theater and in "observed life" the landlord, no matter that he is old, would know the number of floors in his own house if he knew anything at all. Mr. Kidd replies: "Well, to tell you the truth, I don't count them now . . . No, not now . . . Oh, I used to count them, once. Never got tired of it. I used to keep a tack on everything in this house. I had a lot to keep my eye on, then."³⁰ The words convey, in a halting, poetic way, the ambiguity of knowing, not knowing, caring, and not caring. The audience begins to wonder, perhaps, whether all knowable things are worth knowing. Pinter's poetry is basically metaphysical.

Because an outline of the action, no matter how detailed, misses much of the Pinter play, the words, as sound, and, secondarily, as meaning, demand close scrutiny.

Words as sounds little differentiated from pre-

verbal grunts, laughter, groans and gurglings are used as "nonverbal" material in *Happenings*. Words in *Happenings* are auditory rather than linguistic in effect: "Although actual dialogue--the traditional vocal exchange of ideas and information between performers--occurs in Mouth, it cannot be understood by the audience."³¹

Auditory effect is particularly important in the Pinter play as a builder of rhythmic crescendos (as in the climax of Act Two of The Birthday Party when Goldberg and McCann converge verbally upon Stanley), as a means of establishing a character's nervous energy in a particular situation (the short phrasing used by Goldberg in Act One as he explains the art of relaxation he, himself, never masters: "The secret is breathing. Take my tip. It's a well-known fact. Breathe in, breathe out, take a chance, let yourself go, what can you lose? Look at me."³²) as a means of depicting slow-wittedness or tentativeness or confusion through slow, garbled syntax, to establish mood or tone.

In Landscape, Pinter's most recent stage play in one act (presented on the B.B.C. in April, 1968, but as yet unpublished), two speakers, Beth and Duff, talk past each other on two (musical) planes which never dovetail. The woman, speaking in the same low-toned and slow-paced cadences throughout, reminisces about gentle lovemaking in the sand; the man, in a crescendo that rises from concealed

to overt aggressiveness, breaks into her interior monologue with a series of anecdotal vignettes about a walk with his dog, a visit to his pub, his cellarmanship. The couple are separated by the immense distance of a mood, she dreamily dwelling on the imprint of two bodies in the sand, he driven into a fantasy in which the woman is suddenly seized against a gong in the hall. She is all inwardness; he is moving to violent possession like Tarquin.³³

The noiseless movement of the woman versus the orgasmic clashing of cymbals of the man is a counterpoint of mood and tone more revealing of basic sex differences than the subjects (meaning) of their speeches. Sound values predominate. Pinter is using words here in an extra-verbal rather than a non-verbal way as in *Happenings*, however. (Only by muffling the sound to obscurity can meaning be wholly subtracted from words.)

Another way Pinter uses the sound of words, which is a method of the dramatists of the Absurd, is to imitate the language of children. Through brief, highly monosyllabic dialogue and underdeveloped, half-formed, ill-shaped phrases, a "fetal" quality, defined by Alberta Feynman in *Modern Drama*, May, 1966, attaches itself to his characters.³⁴

Child-like language depicts Rose's attempted withdrawal into safety (seclusion) in *The Room* when the blind Negro enters:

You've got a grown-up woman in this room, do you hear? Or are you deaf too? You're not deaf too, are you? You're all deaf and dumb and blind, the lot of you. A bunch of cripples . . . My luck. I get these creeps come in, smelling up my room. What do you want? You can't see me, can you? You're a blind man . . . Can't see a dickeybird.³⁵

The Birthday Party often sounds like an innocent childhood game. Goldberg recalls his "old mum" calling him, the hot water bottles, hot milk, pancakes, soap suds, and gefilte fish of his childhood. Stanley beats a toy drum. The characters play a raucous game of blind-man's buff. The sound of the play is a raspy rendering of musical chairs in which cacaphonic repetitions of childish phrases, verbal duels, and strange juxtapositions occur.

As in music, the "sound" of silence becomes a necessary part of the orchestration of the Pinter play. There are two silences in the plays, Pinter explains, "one when no word is spoken, the other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed . . . the speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place . . ." ³⁶

It is this second silence in the plays, below the spoken words, known and unspoken, which gives the plays their metaphysical bearing. It is to this silence that the audience must reach rather than to an intellectual translation into "meaning."

Antonin Artaud's prescription for the use of the

spoken language in the theater is a premonition of the Pinter play:

To make metaphysics out of a spoken language is to make the language express what it does not ordinarily express: to make use of it in a new, exceptional, and unaccustomed fashion; to reveal its possibilities for producing physical shock; to divide and distribute it actively in space; to deal with intonations in an absolutely concrete manner, restoring their power to shatter as well as really to manifest something; to turn against language and its basely utilitarian, one could say alimentary, sources, against its trapped-beast origins; and finally, to consider language as the form of incantation.³⁷

"This language," Artaud explains, "cannot be defined except by its possibilities for dynamic expression in space as opposed to the expressive possibilities of spoken dialogue." He proclaims that, "What the theater can still take over from speech are its possibilities for extension beyond words, for development in space, for dissociative and vibratory action upon the sensibility."³⁸

Artaud's metaphysical way of considering language is not that of the traditional Occidental theater, "which employs speech not as an active force springing out of the destruction of appearances in order to reach the mind itself, but on the contrary as a completed stage of thought which is lost at the moment of its own exteriorization."³⁹

Speech in the traditional theater expresses the psychological conflicts of man and the daily reality of his life.

But the domain of the theater is not psychological,

Artaud claims, but plastic and physical.⁴⁰ Nor is the domain of the Pinter play psychological. Pinter calls psychiatric conjecture "rubbish" and adds: "I have never read Freud."⁴¹

Artaud's prescription (Artaud prescribes, unlike Aristotle, who, purportedly, describes) for the use of language in the theater includes the language of gesture and mime, wordless pantomime, postures, attitudes, objective intonations, all elements generally considered (in traditional drama) to be a minor part of theater.⁴²

Artaud includes words with great reluctance as part of the language of the theater:

It consists of everything that occupies the stage, everything that can be manifested and expressed materially on a stage and that is addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed primarily to the mind as is the language of words. (I am well aware that words too have possibilities as sound, different ways of being projected into space, which are called intonations. Furthermore, there would be a great deal to say about the concrete value of intonation in the theater, about this faculty words have of creating a music in their own right according to the way they are pronounced, independently of their concrete meaning and even going counter to this meaning--of creating beneath language a subterranean current of impressions, correspondences and analogies.)

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Artaud would not, however, suppress words in the theater, but change their role, reduce their position of importance in resolving social or psychological conflicts.

The Pinter play asks, "What can words do?" as a modern painting asks, "What can pigments, palette knives,

surfaces do?" Pinter surrounds words with silences (space). He uses them in torrents or dabs, but in strictly measured portions. He makes the same use a musician or painter makes of repetition, recapitulation, and contrast. He creates impressions rather than directions or explanations.

The scene of The Dumb Waiter is a basement room. Ben and Gus are, respectively, lying and sitting on a bed. Ben is reading a paper. The only sounds are the rattling of newspaper, the noise of a lavatory chain being pulled, the silence of the lavatory not flushing. Ben slams down the paper:

Ben: Kaw! What about this? Listen to this!

(He refers to the paper.)

A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn't see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

Gus: He what?

Ben: He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

Gus: No?

Ben: The lorry started and ran over him.

Gus: Go on!

Ben: That's what it says here.

Gus: Get away!

Ben: It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?

Gus: Who advised him to do a thing like that?

Ben: A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry!

Gus: It's unbelievable.

Ben: It's down here in black and white.

Gus: Incredible.⁴⁴

Tea is prepared and the merits of the crockery are discussed. Ben slams down his paper again:

Ben: Kaw!

Gus: What's that?

Ben: A child of eight killed a cat!

Gus: Get away!

Ben: It's a fact. What about that, eh? A child of eight killing a cat!

Gus: How did he do it?

Ben: It was a girl.

Gus: How did she do it?

Ben: She--
(He picks up the paper and studies it.)
It doesn't say.

Gus: Why not?

Ben: Wait a minute. It just says--Her brother, aged eleven, viewed the incident from the toolshed.

Gus: Go on!

Ben: That's bloody ridiculous.

Gus: I bet he did it.

Ben: Who?

Gus: The brother.

Ben: I think you're right. (Pause. Slamming down the paper.) What about that, eh? A kid of eleven killing a cat and blaming it on his little sister of eight! It's enough to--⁴⁵

Ben and Gus are waiting in the basement room for further instructions on a job they are going to do. An

order for food comes down the dumb waiter in the room. They send some of their food up the dumb waiter. Ben polishes his revolver. They discuss their last job, a girl, and the fact that women are of looser texture, don't seem to hold together as well as men. More orders come down the dumb waiter and more food is sent up. Gus leaves the room. Ben gets the instructions, which are to kill Gus. Ben levels his revolver at Gus as Gus stumbles back into the room. They stare at each other.

Before Gus goes out, there is a replay of the newspaper scene in a third and final variation:

Ben: Kaw! (He picks up the paper and looks at it.)
Listen to this!
(Pause.)
What about that, eh?
(Pause.)
Kaw!
(Pause.)
Have you ever heard such a thing?

Gus: (dully) Go on!

Ben: It's true.

Gus: Get away.

Ben: It's down here in black and white.

Gus: (very low) Is that a fact?

Ben: Can you imagine it?

Gus: It's unbelievable.

Ben: It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?

Gus: (almost inaudible) Incredible.⁴⁶

The first verbal vignette with the newspaper is a simple report followed by the normal reaction. A man

crawled under a lorry and was killed. Gus thinks it is incredible and Ben wants to vomit.

In the second vignette, however, Gus supplies an idea which the two immediately seize upon as fact: the brother killed the cat and blamed it on his sister. The story is reported, improved upon, accepted in its new form.

The third vignette, which is a step into the domain of the Pinter play, asks a question: to what new plateau can danger progress? Murder is accidental in the first vignette, premeditated (by the girl or her brother) in the second, and--what?--in the third? Enjoyed? Savoured? Or, is murder (death) the final danger? Pinter gives no explanations, no directions.

What Pinter does give are strong impressions. The three vignettes comment upon the action of the play as well as upon the audience's part in the play, emotionally and impressionistically. While Gus and Ben are the "audience" participating in the "events" of the newspaper stories, the audience (represented in the drama by the drama in the stories) is participating in the event of the play.

Gus and Ben judge the first story as the audience judges them (two paid killers waiting for their victim and instructions): incredible, makes one want to vomit.

The two reach within their own natures to improve upon the second story as the audience must reach within its own knowledge of itself in apprehending the play.

In the third vignette, the realizations of the audience and of Gus and Ben merge simultaneously and nearly wordlessly, perhaps to the point of recognition for both that their own story is the incredible one, the one that should effect vomiting.

It is in the third vignette that the audience makes (or should make) the magic identification that is Pinter's theater (and Artaud's, by definition): we know it is we who were speaking.⁴⁷

Recognition, which belongs to the character in traditional theater, belongs to the audience in the Pinter play. Recognition is the turning point of events in much of traditional theater, is the beginning of identification, of continuity between life and the theater in Pinter's (Artaud's) theater.

Pinter's atypical verbalization draws his audience into the vortex of life and of theater; his alogical use of symbols provides the necessary counterpoint, the calm surface.

Much of traditional theater is highly, even expressly symbolical. The drama means rather than is. The audience successfully apprehends the play only insofar as it can decipher the allegory. Often there are various levels of meaning so that an audience must be alert or miss some of the "richness" of the play. Physical objects in traditional theater often have specific, unequivocal

referents.

Physical objects in Happenings, conversely, relate to the experiential world of everyday life, function as direct experience for the audience. When they also function as symbols (which they often do), the symbols are of a private, nonrational, polyvalent character rather than intellectual. In the words of Michael Kirby, writer and editor of Happenings, they:

. . . do not have any one rational public meaning as symbols. Although they may, like everything else, be interpreted, they are intended to stir the observer on an unconscious, alogical level. These unconscious symbols compare with rational symbols only in their aura of "importance": we are aware of a significance and a "meaning," but our minds cannot discover it through the usual channels.⁴⁸

The Pinter play is not an allegory. "Rose is only Rose and not Everyman."⁴⁹ Tangible objects in a Pinter play exist in and for themselves much as they do in Happenings. They are neither mere tools of a narrative nor symbols of conceptual value. When objects in the plays are symbols, as the dumb waiter is obviously a symbol, they have no specific referents. Like symbols in Happenings, they are unconscious, alogical, ambiguous.

The setting of The Caretaker (again, simply a room) provides an intricate assemblage of physical objects:

An iron bed along the left wall. Above it a small cupboard, paint buckets, boxes containing nuts, screws, etc. More boxes, vases, by the side of the bed . . . to the right of the window, a mound: a kitchen sink, a step-ladder, a coal bucket, a lawn-mower, a shopping trolley, boxes, sideboard drawers. Under this mound

an iron bed. In front of it a gas stove. On the gas stove a statue of Buddha. Down right, a fireplace. Around it a couple of suitcases, a rolled carpet, a blow-lamp, a wooden chair on its side, boxes, a number of ornaments, a clothes horse, a few short planks of wood, a small electric fire and a very old electric toaster. Below this a pile of old newspapers. Under Aston's bed by the left wall, is an electrolux, which is not seen till used. A bucket hangs from the ceiling.⁵⁰

Our experiences in traditional theater would lead us to expect that, if any of the above objects exists primarily as "symbol," it is the statue of Buddha on the gas stove. The other objects either have or had a particular and corresponding physical "use." They are related to the experiential world of poverty, clutter, inefficiency, and necessity. The statue of Buddha, on the other hand, relates to art and, thus, carries an implication of affluence, something beyond the necessary, something meaningful rather than useful.

Pinter denies using any symbolical references in his plays: "I have never been conscious of allegorical significance in my plays, either while writing or after writing. I have never intended any specific religious reference or been conscious of using anything as a symbol for anything else."⁵¹

Surely, in this case (we who are conditioned by traditional theater assert), Pinter is wrong. A lawn-mower, a shopping trolley, boxes, these may exist in and for themselves. But a religious statue on a gas stove? The juxtaposition itself . . .

Kent Gallagher agrees with Pinter that the Buddha in The Caretaker just "sits there": "Pinter permits it to squat there enigmatically without bothering to utilize it as he does his other symbols"⁵² but insists that Pinter does "utilize" other symbols in the play. Does he? How?

Pinter's symbols work in a gross rather than a narrow way: they permit the audience to make sudden apprehensions of character and situation, over-all, irreducible mute recognitions. They are the same symbols one meets walking down an alley, on the front page of the newspaper, in the middle of the newspaper, in the bathroom mirror. They are unexplainable (have no referents).

The bucket hanging from the ceiling in The Caretaker is there to catch water because the roof leaks. It is a practical means of temporarily taking care of an unfortunate situation. Aston is planning to tar over the roof at some time in the future and this will be another practical means of temporarily taking care of an unfortunate situation that will not entail regular emptying of a bucket but will entail a certain amount of work. Since work is something Aston avoids whenever he can, the tar job is only a possibility.

Davies, who is a derelict Aston brought in for shelter, left his papers with a man in Sidcup fifteen years ago. His papers prove who he is and he can't move (get a job) without them. As soon as he can go to Sidcup--but

he can't go today, because of the weather, he's waiting for a break in the weather--he'll have his papers and can find a job or accept the one Aston offers.

The bucket and the papers are open to any number of interpretations each of which reduces their significance rather than explains it. Both bespeak of procrastination and laziness. The papers connote self-doubt, fear, problems of identification and self-knowledge, dreams, birth and death, human connections, disorientation, human indifference; the bucket connotes measurement, mystification, outside pressure, danger.

Artaud's description of the "theater of cruelty" accounts for both: " . . . the terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads."⁵³ This gross interpretation of these symbols is the only true one.

Rather than attempt to find referents for Pinter's symbols beyond the gross referent of the human condition, the audience should accept material objects in the plays in the way the characters in The Caretaker accept the statue of the Buddha.

Davies first notices the statue standing on the gas stove as he is telling Aston why he left his wife. (She put her unwashed underwear in the vegetable pan.) He looks at it and turns, goes on with his story. Some time later in the middle of another conversation, Davies picks

up the statue and asks about it:

Davies: What's this?

Aston: (taking and studying it) That's a Buddha.

Davies: Get on.

Aston: Yes. I quite like it. Picked it up in a . . .
a shop. Looked quite nice to me. Don't know
why. What do you think of these Buddhas?

Davies: Oh, they're . . . they're all right, en't they?

Aston: Yes, I was pleased when I got hold of this one.
It's very well made.⁵⁴

The characters make no attempt at a rational or aesthetic evaluation of the statue. There is no imputation of a religious, artistic, or spiritual significance. It is a material object, and the characters glory in its materiality.

Davies is attracted to the statue because it is part of Aston's environment. He notices it, remembers and goes back to it, handles it, studies it, is skeptical when he hears its name. Aston, the owner, does not know quite why he likes it, only that it "looks nice" and is well made. The statue exists for the two entirely on the surface.

Richard Schechner explains, in a description of The Birthday Party, why Pinter's symbols must not be reduced by rational interpretation:

The Birthday Party is brilliant because it operates on the surface. The suggestion of deep meanings must not be tracked down. They function effectively only as suggestions and radiating implications. The play is not an allegory. It is not even consistently symbolic . . . "56

To deny consistent symbolic meaning to the material objects in a Pinter play heightens another sort of meaning, existential meaning. In the plays, Walter Kerr explains, " . . . everything that exists is self-contained, does not derive from something prior to it, is not a marker indicating something to come."⁵⁶

What seems to be an author's note on the danger of symbolic interpretation appears in a speech Ruth makes in The Homecoming:

Look at me. I . . . move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear . . . underwear . . . which moves with me. It . . . captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg . . . moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict . . . your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant . . . than the words which come through them. You must bear that . . . possibility . . . in mind.⁵⁷

Ruth seems to be saying, Kelly Morris asserts in Tulane Drama Review, Winter, 1966, "Beware the suggestive rustle which accompanies the real action, beware dead ends and non-questions, beware distraction by ornament, beware extrapolation."⁵⁸

"The action in Pinter is always 'dressed,'" Morris states, "and often elaborately, always affords glimpses of its 'underwear' but clothing is not the core. The pertinent facts are the ones you see onstage; you should 'restrict . . . your observation' to the simple movement."⁵⁹

Likewise, as has been shown, it is not the discursive connotations of the dialogue which matter, but

the fact and pattern of speech, how it sounds, how it is made, and the impressionistic response it provokes.

An existential understanding of the symbols in the plays together with a metaphysical appreciation for the words (a teapot is a teapot, the words are poetry) brings us within seeing and hearing distance, at least, of the domain of the Pinter play.

CHAPTER III

AN ASSOCIATION WITH REALITY

One's first intellectual impulse upon seeing and hearing The Homecoming is to ask, "What world is this? Is it real?"

With minor exceptions, Act One seems to provide the rudiments of a socially realistic situation, but these slight beginnings develop, in Act Two, into a socially monstrous situation.

Ruth and Teddy come home, in Act One, after six years of living in America, to the slightly, but not yet excessively, strange conglomerate that is Teddy's family: Max, a man of seventy, serves as the head of the household, cook, combined mother/father figure (his wife, Jessie, is dead) to his remaining two sons (only Teddy escaped) and his somewhat younger brother. Teddy's room and bed are still waiting for him, and his father welcomes the prodigal son (who holds a doctorate in philosophy) with an invitation to a "cuddle."

The monstrous social situation that develops in Act Two is that the brothers-in-law begin making love to Ruth in the presence of her husband and he does nothing.

They invite her to stay with them when her husband goes back to America, to earn her living as a prostitute by four hours' work each night (one of the brothers-in-law is a small-time pimp), and to minister to their wants and needs during the other hours of the day. She accepts. Teddy leaves for America.

Commentators on the play (including Pinter) have failed to define the situation in The Homecoming. Much has been made of the animal images, the "natural" versus the "civilized" state by Bernard Dukore.⁶⁰ Kelly Morris calls the play a "comedy of manners" and the characters "grotesques, rather like Humours."⁶¹ Dr. Abraham Franzbau, a psychiatrist, defines a well-known psychological stereotype inherent in the play, the "menage-a-trois," in which unconscious homosexuals gain excitement from making love to the same woman, in each other's presence in its bluntest form and with each other's knowledge in milder forms.⁶²

Pinter, himself, prefers an interpretation by critic George Ryan of a small Catholic newspaper (The Pilot) who found the play to be about the "family of man waged in so desperate a search for love that it reverts to the barbaric and animalistic whenever challenged and confronted by such love."⁶³

When asked what The Homecoming was "about," Pinter replied, "It's about love and lack of love. The people are harsh and cruel . . . but are not acting arbitrarily but

for very deep seated reasons."⁶⁴ Pinter considers the play realistic rather than a representation of universal forces in society distorted by exaggeration: "I was only concerned with this particular family. I didn't relate them to any other possible or concrete family . . . I was only concerned with their reality. The whole play happens on a quite realistic level from my point of view."⁶⁵

Pinter explains the husband's non-interference and the wife's strange form of love-making:

Look! What would happen if he interfered. He would have a messy fight on his hands, wouldn't he? And this particular man would avoid that. As for rolling on the couch, there are thousands of women in this very country, who at this very moment are rolling off couches with their brothers or cousins, or their next door neighbors. The most respectable women do this. It's a splendid activity. It's a little curious, certainly, when your husband is looking on, but it doesn't mean you're a harlot.⁶⁶

As for the wife's staying behind to become a prostitute (leaving three children in America), Pinter declares, "If this had been a happy marriage, it wouldn't have happened."⁶⁷

Obviously, other options are open to the husband besides calmly looking on while his brothers make love to his wife. He could pack his suitcase and leave, for instance. Pinter's assumption that a fight is the only alternative to Teddy's strange (and, to the audience, extremely disconcerting) non-action is ridiculous. His assertion that the wife's actions are nothing more than

"a little curious" is equally so.

Dukore's, Morris's, and Franzbau's definitions of The Homecoming fail because the play will not fit into their precise and limiting categories. Pinter's critical attempt to place the play on a level of social realism fails because his idea of realism is the antithesis of the audience's idea of realism, which is an idea of passion. Telling a disconcerted audience why it should not be disconcerted at Teddy's passivity does not change the fact of that reaction.

Pinter claims his characters are acting "out of the texture of their lives and for reasons which are not evil but slightly desperate."⁶⁸ If the audience could perceive this, their abhorrence would be mollified.

The characters seem to be acting, however, in a calculated rather than a desperate way. They seem to be living totally within their environment rather than within themselves. They are robots making programmed but fragmentary responses. Frozen when the play begins, they melt, move, mutate, only to become frozen again at the end of the play. They have no existence for the audience or for each other besides that which occurs on the stage.

In short, Pinter's characters have an existence much like those shadowy entities who occupy our darkest dreams.

Peter Luke's play, Hadrian the Seventh, depicts

Frederick Rolfe, a failed Catholic, rejected priest, rogue and writer, who creates himself as the second English Pope by incorporating the imagined fact in a long novel arduously produced in a cold garret. The pomp and ceremony, the humble restitutions paid Rolfe by formerly critical Catholics, the final fact of Rolfe's supremacy on earth in the Catholicism he loved and hated are not wish-fulfilling dreams as they are called by critics,⁶⁹ but are dreams transmuted into existence through art.

Likewise, the Pinter play exists as a special kind of transmuted dream. The association of the playwright to the play is as deep as dream-consciousness: "Finding the characters and letting them speak for themselves is the great excitement of writing . . ."⁷⁰

Why is the audience disconcerted when Teddy watches his brothers make love to his wife? Because love-making should be private? No, they are watching and are not disturbed at their own attendance. Because the brothers are making love to a relative, their sister-in-law? No, the audience is sophisticated enough to realize this kind of thing happens. Because Teddy does not act? Partly. The audience would be relieved if Teddy interfered. They would be more "at home" in the situation. More than by the lack of action, however, the audience is disturbed by its own identification with both the happenings and the lack of action: "We know it is we who were speaking."⁷¹

The realism of the Pinter play is the dark and true realism of Pinter's (man's) dreams, a realism that is the antithesis of social realism and psychological realism. (There is little logic to man's psyche.) It is a realism of the unknown rather than of the known, of the strange rather than of the ordinary. It is to this realism that the audience reaches and responds in The Homecoming.

In Act One Teddy shows the house of his childhood to Ruth:

What do you think of the room? Big, isn't it? It's a big house. I mean it's a fine room, don't you think? Actually there was a wall, across there . . . with a door. We knocked it down . . . years ago . . . to make an open living area. The structure wasn't affected, you see. My mother was dead.⁷²

Later in the same act, Lenny meets his sister-in-law for the first time, and tells her about an experience by the docks in which he was propositioned by a lady who was "falling apart with the pox."⁷³ Ruth asks: "How did you know she was diseased?" Lenny replies: "How did I know? (Pause.) I decided she was."⁷⁴

Strange juxtapositions occur in dreams and stranger logic. "The structure wasn't affected . . . my mother was dead" and "How did I know? . . . I decided she was" are fragments of an inexplicable reality that must be felt by the audience rather than known in the usual manner of knowing things.

Much later, not only do Teddy's father and brothers

propose to keep Ruth with them as a combination housekeeper/whore, but they invite Teddy to cash in on the profits as well, to join the enterprise:

Lenny: No, what I mean, Teddy, you must know lots of professors, heads of departments, men like that . . . They pop over here for a week at the Savoy, they need somewhere they can go to have a nice quiet poke. And of course you'd be in a position to give them inside information.

Max: Sure. You can give them proper data. You know, the kind of thing she's willing to do. How far she'd be prepared to go with their little whims and fancies. Eh, Lenny? To what extent she's various. I mean if you don't know who does?

(Pause.)

I bet you before two months we'd have a waiting list.

Lenny: You could be our representative in the States.

Max: Of course. We're talking in international terms! By the time we've finished Pan-American'll give us a discount.

(Pause.)

Teddy: She'd get old . . . very quickly.⁷⁵

Teddy, up to the point of his reply, has not been participating in the imaginative creation of the scheme, but has made small protests concerning the fact that he and Ruth are married and should be going home to the children. The bizarre scheme becomes banal with Teddy's reply; his banal reply becomes bizarre within the context of the proposed scheme and the situation. Confusion between the two persists when Ruth enters:

Teddy: Ruth . . . the family have invited you to stay,

for a little while longer. As a . . . as a kind of guest. If you like the idea I don't mind. We can manage very easily at home . . . until you come back.

Ruth: How very nice of them.

Max: It's an offer from our heart.

Ruth: It's very sweet of you.

Max: Listen . . . it would be our pleasure.

(Pause.)

Ruth: I think I'd be too much trouble.⁷⁶

Here, bizarre situation and social cliché become names for each other, meld into a dream-entity where the mysterious is banal and the banal mysterious: "Every poet knows that the world of mysterious dreams is to be found at the very centre of banality."⁷⁷

A kaleidoscope of pieces of experience now appears: money and business, the number of rooms Ruth is to have, her allowance, law, contracts, witnesses, wardrobes, conveniences, capital investment, inventories, signatures, workable arrangements, floors, beds, and cooking, scrubbing and keeping company.

The kaleidoscope focuses suddenly as in an abruptly-ended dream on Max's brother, Sam, who blurts out in one breath: "MacGregor had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove them along."⁷⁸

As suddenly as this generation becomes a reflection of the one that went before, promiscuity becomes a way of life. Max begins to wonder how it will work out for this

new step in the line of descent, suspects, in the nightmare of his last address to Ruth, that it will not work at all:

Listen. You think you're just going to get that big slag all the time? You think you're just going to have him . . . you're going to just have him all the time? You're going to have to work! You'll have to take them on, you understand?

(Pause.)

Does she realize that?

(Pause.)

Lenny, do you think she understands . . .

(He begins to stammer.)

What . . . what . . . what . . . we're getting at? What . . . we've got in mind? Do you think she's got it clear?

(Pause.)

I don't think she's got it clear.

(Pause.)

You understand what I mean? Listen, I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll use us, she'll make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet?

(Pause.)

She won't . . . be adaptable!⁷⁹

The pieces of the play are complete, the dream is transmuted, the dark reality set forth to be apprehended and interpreted by the audience.

Several aspects of the dark reality, however, may be readily apparent to the audience as aspects of the plays, yet not so apparent as aspects of their own lives.

Dislocation is the first dark reality noticed by the Pinter audience. The time, in the Pinter play, is the present, but a distorted present. Rooms, as in The Room, may or may not have floors above or below them. Orders are issued from wholly invisible sources as in The Dumb Waiter.

Uncertainty about the past, a source of the dislocation in the present, is next ascertainable. The characters are without true or discoverable histories. Earlier events are hinted at obliquely rather than specified and, thus, have no preordained consequences. Rumor, rather than fact, is the order of explication.

The uncertain past and the dislocated present join in effecting an unpredictable future. No pattern, either recognizable or understandable, exists. Rather, there is a blind collision of "two isolated forces entering an area simultaneously, behaving simply as they behave."⁸⁰

Danger, in the Pinter play, thus has no clear source, no present face, no future conclusion. (In traditional theater danger usually has all three as it does for Oedipus and Willy Loman.) It is the contemporary danger, which drives us to anxiety and dread, but not to action. "Instead of passing from past crime to future punishment, Pinter's characters . . . stand trembling before all possibility."⁸¹

In the face of this contemporary danger, the

reaction of Pinter's characters is to talk about something else. There is small talk rather than a confrontation of the issues and relationships.

Pinter has been quoted as saying:

I feel that instead of any inability to communicate there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that there is continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things rather than what is at the root of their relationship.⁸²

People fall back on anything they can lay their hands on verbally to keep away from the danger of knowing and being known.⁸³

Pinter's dark reality is, in fact, the unacknowledged nether side of contemporary life: "Much of what strikes us as irrational, comic, or even idiotic, [Pinter] . . . says he has merely set down as actually observed."⁸⁴

CHAPTER IV

DISSOCIATION: PINTER'S THEATRICALITY

How does Pinter transmute the dark reality which he finds to be inherent in contemporary life? How does he portray obscurity, dislocation, unpredictability, lack of communication, and the other dark subjections of contemporary man?

Because the matter of his plays is as obscure as life, Pinter's transmutation of matter, his manner, is sometimes seen as being equally obscure. Because he writes about a world in which, in his own words, "there are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false"⁸⁵ and a world where "the thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false,"⁸⁶ many critics believe, with Richard Schechner, that "Pinter's goal is . . . to mystify us."⁸⁷

Pinter's goal is, rather, good theater. To explain the menace, to define danger, besides being an impossible task, would be poor theater. "The menace is effective almost in inverse proportion to its degree of particularization, the extent to which it involves overt physical violence or direct threats."⁸⁸ The physical action against

Stanley Webber in The Birthday Party is not as effectively troubling as the mental annihilation he receives.

"The more doubt there is about the exact nature of the menace, the exact provocation which has brought it into being, the less chance there is of anyone in the audience feeling that anyway it could not happen to him."⁸⁹ It is precisely because the audience does not know Stanley's crime or if there was a crime committed that Goldberg's and McCann's persecution is effective theater. If the crime were known, or even if it were known that an unknown crime had been committed by Stanley, the audience would feel safely left out; after all, Stanley, not the audience committed the crime and deserves to await the punishment.

Pinter's goal, however, is not mystification in the usual theatrical sense, as a problem for the audience to "work out" or as a suspenseful situation for the playwright to exploit dramatically and finally answer. There are no final answers in the Pinter play any more than there are final answers (known and agreeable to all) in life.

Pinter's goal is, rather, the play itself. As a disinterested artist, Pinter employs clarity rather than obscurity, though his subject matter is necessarily the latter. By turning his attention inward upon the plays themselves, upon the mechanics of his art, Pinter portrays the obscurity he finds to be life with meticulous

precision.

How does a playwright portray obscurity with precision? The Lover is a lesson in the art.

Nearly everything is ambiguous in The Lover except the play itself. Two characters play double parts of husband/lover and wife/mistress. The husband/lover part is further refined to include a bothersome man in the park and the park-keeper who sends the bothersome man away. (The husband is playing the lover who plays both the man in the park and the park-keeper.)

As the parts shift, there is a careful shift in tone, in the properties used (low, sturdy shoes for the wife, high delicate heels for the mistress, a bongo drum for the wife/lover scene), and in the scene as imagined by the characters.

The imagined characters are, themselves, ambiguous for it is not Richard's mistress who meets the wife's lover but Richard, the husband, meeting his mistress and Sarah, the wife, meeting her lover. (The meeting of lover and mistress would leave husband and wife in the never-never-land of ordinary marriage so is not allowed.)

To indicate the ambiguity of the roles, even of the imagined roles, Pinter allows the bongo drum to be discovered by the wrong person at the wrong time, allows the wife to wear the shoes of the mistress. The comingling of roles is portrayed by an overlapping of properties

and scenes.

Not only does the play concern a bored husband and wife seeking to enhance their sexual lives through an imaginary extramarital arrangement, but it more importantly concerns boredom in the extramarital arrangement. It is this second boredom that produces the complications in the play.

Pinter indicates the existence of "extramarital" boredom and the fine points of its essence very early in the play by showing that Richard and his mistress need the added titillation of discussing his wife. Richard tells Sarah, the wife, that he and his mistress occasionally talk about her:

Sarah: How . . . do you talk about me?

Richard: Delicately. We discuss you as we would play an antique music box. We play it for our titillation, whenever desired.⁹⁰

Stability and dullness are a necessary enhancement to the erotic moment. The wife exists as an erotic counterpoint to the husband/mistress as well as the reverse.

Ambiguity of motive is also apparent in Pinter's manipulation of events. Sarah, who wants the arrangement to stay the same: " . . . I think things are beautifully balanced, Richard . . ."⁹¹ forgets to change the properties to match the scenes, wears the high-heeled shoes while playing the wife.

Richard, who insists the relationships have to stop:

"Yes, I've come to an irrevocable decision on that point"⁹²
becomes the savior of the status quo by coming in the
evening, as lover, instead of in the afternoon. Suddenly,
"love" reawakens:

Sarah: . . . It's whispering time. Isn't it?

(She takes his hands. He sinks to his knees,
with her. They are kneeling together, close.
She strokes his face.)

It's a very late tea. Isn't it? But I think
I like it. Aren't you sweet? I've never
seen you before after sunset. My husband's
at a late-night conference. Yes, you look
different. Why are you wearing this strange
suit, and this tie? You usually wear some-
thing else, don't you? Take off your jacket.

(Silence. She is very close to him.)

Richard: Yes.
(Pause.)
Change.
(Pause.)
Change.
(Pause.)
Change your clothes.
(Pause.)
You lovely whore.

(They are still, kneeling, she leaning over
him.)⁹³

The arrangement will, apparently, go on until all
times of the day are "used," until the couple's
imagination fail.

Pinter has created from elements of essential
ambiguity a play which clearly celebrates the romantic
imagination in all its power and vulnerability. The play
is about play-acting and play-actors: how they operate,

what their successes and failures are. Its "meaning" cannot be reduced to the existential meaning Walter Kerr suggests (that woman has a dual role of wife and whore)⁹⁴ or the quest for verification and reality deemed its meaning by John Russel Taylor⁹⁵ because the romantic imagination simply does not care which person Sarah is or which man Richard except inasmuch as which person seems at the time to be more seductive. The point of the play-acting is arousal to romantic compatibility. When the arousal is effected, the play ends.

The stability of the actual scene of the play, the marriage, marks its structural clarity. We are at all times in the home (marriage) of Richard and Sarah watching Richard play the husband, the lover, the bothersome man in the park and the park-keeper and watching Sarah play the wife and Richard's mistress.

Within this "theater within a theater" which is the home of Richard and Sarah, the play, like The Home-coming where hints at Ruth's fall/triumph occur very early in the play and build to an almost inevitable conclusion, moves through a carefully calculated progression.

Sarah and Richard discuss with connubial amiability the fact that Sarah's lover is due in the afternoon. Richard leaves for work. The lovers' meeting is discussed that night, again amiably, by husband and wife as they enjoy drinks before dinner. Richard begins to ask

questions which make Sarah exceedingly uncomfortable. He begins to taunt her with the fact that his mistress is a whore and their relationship no more than "a quick cup of cocoa while they're checking the oil and water."⁹⁶ Her self-righteous conclusion is: "I seem to have a far richer time than you do."⁹⁷ The imagined relationship is shown very early to be on two different levels of experience.

The next afternoon, the confrontation takes place, but carefully and in stages. The lover appears first as the bothersome man in the park, next as the park-keeper who rescues, then seduces her. Finally, wife and lover meet, but the meeting is a failure. The lover wants to discuss her husband and his wife. He tells her, finally, that he has played his last game. "You're too bony,"⁹⁸ he says and leaves without seducing her.

The failure is analyzed when the husband returns in the early evening. Sarah reports that her afternoon has not been successful:

Sarah: We all have our off days.

Richard: He, too? I thought the whole point of being a lover is that one didn't. I mean if I, for instance, were called upon to fulfill the function of a lover and felt disposed, shall we say, to accept the job, well, I'd as soon give it up as be found incapable of executing its proper and consistent obligation.⁹⁹

Out of the failure comes success. Richard begins to work at the relationship. He begins by forbidding Sarah to have the lover in his house: "Take him out into

the fields. Find a ditch. Or a slag heap. Find a rubbish dump . . . Buy a canoe and find a stagnant pond."¹⁰⁰ He calls her, softly, "Adulteress."¹⁰¹

That it is complication Richard craves and tension the relationship has lacked finally becomes clear to Sarah, who reciprocates, in full:

Do you think he's the only one who comes! Do you? Do you think he's the only one I entertain? Mmmnn? Don't be silly. I have other visitors, all the time, I receive all the time. Other afternoons, all the time. When neither of you know, neither of you. I give them strawberries in season. With cream. Strangers, total strangers. But not to me, not while they're here. They come to see the hollyhocks. And then they stay for tea. Always. Always.¹⁰²

The final embrace now becomes possible and even necessary. The relationship, for the time, is saved.

To produce dramatic clarity (not clarity of "meaning") through a complex structuring of ambiguous elements is the aim of the disinterested playwright. The play is not intended to teach a lesson or serve a purpose beyond itself. It is not an indictment of the extramarital or even of the marital arrangement. It is not a how-to hint for stale lovers. The play does not mean but is. Like a poem or works of sculpture, it exists to be apprehended in and for itself.

The Lover, which is the nearest of the Pinter plays to Artaud's description of the Balinese theater (his prescription for Occidental theater), is the clearest statement Pinter makes about theatricality, about the

transmutation of his particular view of reality.

Artaud would restore Occidental theater to the ceremonious and mystic theater of the Orient, especially the Balinese theater:

The spectacle of the Balinese theater, which draws upon dance, song, pantomime--and a little of the theater as we understand it in the Occident--restores the theater, by means of ceremonies of indubitable age and well-tried efficacy, to its original destiny which it presents as a combination of all these elements fused together in a perspective of hallucination and fear.¹⁰³

The plays in Balinese theater begin "with an entrance of phantoms; the male and female characters who will develop a dramatic but familiar subject appear to us first in their spectral aspect and are seen in that hallucinatory perspective . . . before the situations . . . are allowed to develop."¹⁰⁴

Sarah is emptying and dusting ashtrays in the living-room as The Lover begins. Richard moves from the bedroom to the hall, where he collects his briefcase, from the hall to the living-room, where he goes to Sarah, kisses her on the cheek.

They smile at each other:

Richard: (amiably) Is your lover coming today?

Sarah: Mmnn.

Richard: What time?

Sarah: Three.

Richard: Will you be going out . . . or staying in?

Sarah: Oh . . . I think we'll stay in.

Richard: I thought you wanted to go to that exhibition.

Sarah: I did, yes . . . but I think I'd prefer to stay in with him today.

Richard: Mmn-hmmn. Well, I must be off.¹⁰⁵

As the two meet for the ritual of wifely/husbandly leavetaking, their words are used as gestures. They play-act in a verbal pantomime a ceremony rather than a conversation.

After a fade out and fade up, it is early evening and Richard returns. The ritual of "husband's return" is played. She pours a drink, he kisses her on the cheek, takes the glass, hands her the evening paper. He drinks, sits back, and sighs with contentment:

Richard: Aah.

Sarah: Tired?

Richard: Just a little.

Sarah: Bad traffic?

Richard: No. Quite good traffic, actually.

Sarah: Oh, good.

Richard: Very smooth. (Pause.)

Sarah: It seemed to me you were just a little late.

Richard: Am I?

Sarah: Just a little.

Richard: There was a bit of a jam on the bridge.¹⁰⁶

Richard and Sarah are, obviously, not themselves as characters are normally "themselves" in Occidental theater,

but are phantoms of Richard and Sarah: "husband" and "wife." Throughout the play they are never seen except as in their own hallucinations.

The gestures and words of the two are ritualistic rather than communicative, depend upon artifice rather than upon logic. Methodically calculated effects are produced with words and phrases equivalent to the mechanically rolling eyes, pouting lips, and muscular spasms of the actor in a Balinese mime.

The Lover is a sketch of the lover as Oriental theater is a sketch of the fisherman, the geisha, the dreamer: form is content. "The themes [in Oriental theater] are vague, abstract, extremely general. They are given life only by the fertility and intricacy of all the artifices of the stage which impose upon our minds like the conception of a metaphysics derived from a new use of gesture and voice."¹⁰⁷

Richard playing the lover playing the bothersome man in the park sits with Sarah on a chaise:

He begins to tap the drum. Her forefinger moves along drum towards his hand. She scratches the back of his hand sharply. Her hand retreats. Her fingers tap one after the other towards him, and rest. Her forefinger scratches between his fingers. Her other fingers do the same. His legs tauten. His hand clasps hers. Her hand tries to escape. Wild beats of their fingers tangling. Stillness.¹⁰⁸

Artaud's description of the Balinese actor moving in a mathematically-controlled impersonal way, producing

an effect of maximum significance is apropos:

Everything is thus regulated and impersonal; not a movement of the muscles, not the rolling of an eye but seem to belong to a kind of reflective mathematics which controls everything and by means of which everything happens. And the strange thing is that in this systematic depersonalization, in these purely muscular facial expressions, applied to the features like masks, everything produces a significance, everything affords the maximum effect.¹⁰⁹

Like the Balinese theater, Pinter's theater reinforces Friedrich Hebbel's philosophy: "Form is the highest content."¹¹⁰

Pinter, in fact, achieves the "alienation effect" sought and never achieved by Bertolt Brecht. It is difficult to imagine an emotional purgation (in the manner of the "Aristotelian theater" Brecht despised) in Pinter's theater. It is impossible to imagine the spectator making an emotional identification with a Pinter hero.

In seeking to alienate or distance his characters, Pinter does not, like Brecht does, have a didactic purpose. Problems do not exist to be solved as in Brecht's plays of protest. They exist to "release the characters' impulses toward the 'frontiers of consciousness.' Here there are no solutions or resolutions but motives that defy definition and feelings that elude classification."¹¹¹

Pinter does not protest against the things he describes, does not suggest that man become more truly "involved" in his environment, that increased communication

between people will improve relationships. (Indeed, Pinter believes the opposite, that increased communication would be fatal.)

Neither didactic purpose nor contrived emotional effects are involved in Pinter's theatricality. The playwright definitely dissociates himself from both.

CHAPTER V

WHERE THE PINTER PLAY HAPPENS

In relation to traditional theater, modern Happenings, and the "in between" theater of John Arden, we have seen that the Pinter play happens on a dramatic plane separated in essential ways from these, but organically related to each.

An analysis of words and symbols in the plays has shown the poetical/metaphysical bearing of the plays as well as their existential manifestation.

The "reality" of the plays has been defined as that dark reality man acknowledges only in his dreams, the antithesis of social and psychological realities.

Pinter's association with dream-consciousness as the source material of his plays, however, does not preclude an accompanying dissociation: his actions, in creating the plays, are those of the disinterested artist.

Pinter's aims have been shown to be neither didacticism (in the manner of Brecht) nor contrived emotional involvement of the audience (in the manner of "Aristotelian" theater) but rather the plays themselves. Form is content in the Pinter play.

The dramatic plane of the Pinter play can be

associated, in an essential way, with only one pre-existing theatrical idea or convention: Artaud's Theater of Cruelty. Indeed, the Pinter play happens precisely in that flamboyant world.

What are the subjects and themes of the Theater of Cruelty? They are defined by Artaud:

The Theater of Cruelty will choose subjects and themes corresponding to the agitation and unrest characteristic of our epoch . . . it will again bring into fashion the great preoccupations and great essential passions which the modern theater has hidden under the patina of pseudocivilized man.

These themes will be cosmic, universal . . . Renouncing psychological man, with his well-dissected character and feelings, and social man, submissive to laws and misshapen by religions and precepts, the Theater of Cruelty will address itself only to total man.

. . . the reality of imagination and dreams will appear there on equal footing with life. . .

. . . great social upheavals, conflicts between peoples and races, natural forces, interventions of chance, and the magnetism of fatality will manifest themselves either indirectly . . . or directly¹¹²

The subjects and themes of the Theater of Cruelty are the gross ones Pinter employs: total man, his blindness, his vulnerability, his ambiguity.

The Theater of Cruelty seeks to reach total man as well as portray him, seeks to re-unite mind and senses into one entity, soul: "We need above all a theater that wakes us up: nerves and heart,"¹¹³ Artaud declares. "We cannot go on prostituting the idea of theater whose only value is in its excruciating, magical relation to reality

and danger."¹¹⁴

Artaud's employment of the word "cruelty" opposes the definition in Webster's New World Dictionary: "the quality of being cruel, inhumanity . . ."¹¹⁵ Artaud's definition of cruelty is "humanity" rather than "inhumanity." Cruelty is, in his view, an "appetite for life, a cosmic rigor and implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of that pain part from whose ineluctable necessity life could not continue."¹¹⁶

Artaud's cruelty transcends an idea of physical pain, suffering and bloodshed: "Cruelty is above all lucid, a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity. There is no cruelty without consciousness . . . it is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone's death."¹¹⁷

Artaud's definition encompasses, finally, life itself: "Effort is a cruelty, existence through effort is a cruelty. Rising from his repose and extending himself into being, Brahma suffers . . . desire . . . is cruelty, death is cruelty, resurrection is cruelty, transfiguration is cruelty."¹¹⁸

More simply, Artaud says "cruelty" as he might say "life" or "necessity."

We have seen how the Pinter play differs from traditional theater, from modern Happenings, and from the

contemporary drama of Arden. The extent of this difference and its depth can be seen in an analysis of the way cruelty operates in two Pinter plays: The Dwarfs, a play Pinter says was of great value to himself, as playwright, though "apparently ninety-nine people out of a hundred feel it's a waste of time"¹¹⁹ and The Collection.

The Dwarfs, the densest of the plays in the sense that it contains much talk and very little action, is, according to Pinter, a play about betrayal and distrust.¹²⁰ However, the states of mind, reactions, and relationships in the play are sparsely portrayed and are probably clear only to Pinter.

In spite of the non-theatricality of The Dwarfs (Pinter began it as a novel and himself admits the play "obviously . . . can't be successful"¹²¹), the play is an acute representation of cruelty's force in the mental gyrations of one character, Len.

Three definitions Artaud assigns cruelty--existence through effort, conscious submission to necessity, and that pain apart from which life cannot continue--are exemplified in Len.

The effort of simple living is exhausting to Len, who admires and fears, imagines and communicates, but avoids, whenever he can, doing because he is so (cruelly) involved with being.

The cost of every action is carefully measured by

Len: energy must be fed, and feeding energy takes more energy:

Work makes me hungry. I was working that day . . . I have to run downstairs to put the kettle on, run upstairs to finish what I'm doing, run downstairs to cut a sandwich or arrange a salad, run upstairs to finish what I'm doing, run back downstairs to see to the sausages, if I'm having sausages, run back upstairs to finish what I'm doing, run back downstairs to lay the table, run back upstairs to finish what I'm doing, run back . . .¹²²

Len avoids work rather than works at the train station: "The trains come in, I give a bloke half a dollar, he does my job, I curl up in the corner and read the timetables."¹²³ Work is what the dwarfs (entirely figments of Len's imagination) do:

The dwarfs are back on the job, keeping an eye on proceedings. They clock in very early, scenting the event . . . They wait for a smoke signal and unpack their kit. They're on the spot with no time wasted and circle the danger area . . . they don't stop work until the job in hand is ended, one way or another.¹²⁴

What Len does is crucify his own existence through lack of discrimination between sense and intellect, through acceptance of his senses as intellect:

This is my room. This is a room . . . There are six walls. Eight walls. An octagon. This room is an octagon. There are my shoes, on my feet. There is no wind. This is a journey and an ambush. This is the centre of the cold, a halt to the journey and no ambush. This is the deep grass I keep to. This is the thicket in the centre of the night and the morning. There is my hundred watt bulb like a dagger. It is neither night nor morning . . . Perhaps a morning will arrive. If a morning arrives, it will not destroy my fixture, nor my luxury.¹²⁵

Len's effort is an effort at orientation rather than the sort of effort through action the dwarfs make.

Because Len's effort is inward, he makes no visible progress, leaves no traces, either ugly or beautiful, as the dwarfs do: "All their leavings pile up, pile mixing with pile . . ."126

Who, where, and what man is are questions that involve Len in conscious submission to necessity as well as excruciating effort. Of all the Pinter characters, Len is the only one who articulates (rather than evades) the danger of knowing:

The point is, who are you? . . . Occasionally I believe I perceive a little of what you are but that's pure accident. Pure accident on both our parts, the perceived and the perceiver. It's nothing like an accident, it's deliberate, it's a joint pretence. We depend on these accidents, on these contrived accidents, to continue. It's not important that it's a conspiracy or hallucination. What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can't keep up with it and I'm damn sure you can't either. But who you are I can't even begin to recognize, and sometimes I recognize it so wholly, so forcibly, I can't look, and how can I be certain of what I see?127

Len's consciousness of fate extends to the rooms he lives in: "They change shape at their own will. I wouldn't grumble if only they would keep to some consistency. But they don't. And I can't tell the limits, the boundaries, which I've been led to believe are natural."128 He notices that, when he is on a train, the lights in the rooms he sees seem to be still, but only because he is moving; then that he is not moving at all, but, sitting in the corner of the train, is being moved.

Len, in short, submits himself to knowing that his

own end is, painfully, nothing more than another kind of beginning . . . for someone or something else.

By refusing to evade (in a "life of action") the issues of life and death, Len embraces that pain apart from which life cannot continue Artaud calls "cruelty" and, by doing so, effects his own spiritual metamorphosis.

The final moments of the play illustrate metaphorically the death, resurrection, and transfiguration of cruelty.

The dwarfs, who have haunted Len's thoughts throughout the play in the most unappetizing, cruel ways, stop eating, douse their fire, and stack their belongings in piles. Len becomes abruptly aware of a change in his world (himself):

And this change. All about me the change. The yard as I know it is littered with scraps of cat's meat, pig bollocks, tin cans, bird brains, spare parts of all the little animals, a squelching squealing carpet, all the dwarfs' leavings, spittled in the muck, worms stuck in the poisoned shit heaps, the alleys a whirlpool of piss, slime, blood, and fruit juice.

Now all is bare. All is clean. All is scrubbed. There is a lawn. There is a shrub. There is a flower.¹²⁹

The change Len notices is an abrupt corporeal metamorphosis, but it signifies the change in himself he does not notice, a slow and difficult spiritual change. It is Len's courage that allows his final union with the beautiful: the path to the flower lies in animal leavings.

Like no other Pinter character, Len faces,

articulates, and illustrates (in the dwarf-dream) Pinter's preoccupation with danger; like no other Pinter play, The Dwarfs (which is scarcely a play at all, but rather an interrupted monologue of the playwright) leaves the audience with a final image of radiance.

Artaud's cruelty operates more subtly in The Collection. Here, as in every Pinter play but The Dwarfs, Pinter subordinates content to form. The Collection does not, like The Dwarfs, look in danger's eye or admit the evasion from doing so in forthright terms. Like every Pinter play but The Dwarfs, it circumvents the final answer and, therefore, reaches no radiant conclusion.

Artaud's cruelty is inherent in the content of The Dwarfs; it becomes augmented, in The Collection, to the higher position of form.

Victor E. Amend, in September, 1967 Modern Drama, declares that deficiencies occur in the form of the absurd play and that the Pinter plays, as dramas of the absurd, have at least five specific deficiencies:

1. The symbols have no referents.
2. Ambiguous conversations and actions lead to generally ambiguous interpretations.
3. It is hard to communicate lack (or evasion) of communication.
4. The plays are about grubby characters with grubby souls.
5. All in all, there is a negative approach to values.

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Amend had previously stated that The Collection happens in "an absurd world where there is nothing stable or

unchangeable" and that "the absurd world is much like the real world."¹³¹

Amend's proposition that the form of the drama of the absurd, given the content of the absurd world, is deficient is, in itself, absurd. Surely Pinter is right in employing a form that fortifies rather than denies content.

Walter Kerr interprets the form of the Pinter play to be a melding of form and content to the enhancement of the play:

Harold Pinter seems to me the only man working in the theater today who writes existential plays existentially. By this I mean that he does not simply content himself with restating a handful of existentialist themes inside familiar forms of playmaking. He remakes the play altogether so that it will function according to existentialist principle.¹³²

Essence does not precede existence in the Pinter play. Rather, an exploratory void without preconception occurs first, and conceptualization later, if at all.¹³³

The Pinter play is a discovery in the way that personality, under existentialism, is discovery. It has not been fashioned to fit a hard and fast idea about man, or society, or the nature of things.¹³⁴

Artaud's cruelty superimposes itself upon The Collection in an existential way: it is discovered rather than exploited by the playwright, experienced rather than simply discovered by the audience.

The Collection is rather than portrays the

agitation and unrest characteristic of our epoch Artaud chose as the essence of subjects and themes for his Theater of Cruelty. The play is rather than portrays a revelation of total man. It is rather than portrays a magical relation to reality and danger.

How does Pinter augment cruelty from its essential position as subject matter in The Dwarfs to its higher position as subject and form in The Collection?

He begins by giving existence free reign, accepting it as primary, granting it the mystery of not yet having named itself.¹³⁵

The true situation is never named in The Collection. We are not even certain there is one. Whether or not anything at all occurred in Leeds between Stella and Bill is as ambiguous a question as whether or not the man and young woman met Last Year at Marienbad.¹³⁶ What Pinter provides are the constantly changing and always opposing claims of the characters. (We never know their viewpoints.)

The play begins when an anonymous voice calls Harry's place and asks for Bill. That Harry and Bill live together in a homosexual "marriage" is evident from Harry's suspicious and bellicose replies. The voice persists even though Harry refuses to wake Bill: "Tell him I'll be in touch."¹³⁷

Immediately the scene changes to the heterosexual marriage of James and Stella. Here, we learn only that James

will not join Stella "at work" today due to other plans

There is a switch back to the homosexual marriage: Harry nags Bill about fixing the stair rod. They discuss the anonymous call in the middle of the night. When Harry leaves, the caller rings again, tells Bill he is coming to see him. Bill leaves. When James comes, only Harry is at home. Harry wants to know if James is the anonymous caller. James replies: "I think you've got the wrong man." Harry answers: "I think you have."¹³⁸

Back at the flat, the scene of the heterosexual marriage, Stella enters and takes off her gloves, plays a record, lies back on a sofa nuzzling a white Persian kitten.

At the same time, at the house (scene of the homosexual marriage), James has finally met Bill, asks: "Did you have a good time in Leeds last week?"¹³⁹

As the two scenes (marriages) converge, the first view of the night in Leeds occurs:

James: You booked into 142. But you didn't stay there.

Bill: Well, that's a bit silly, isn't it? Booking a room and not staying in it?

James: 165 is just along the passage to 142, you're not far away.

Bill: Oh well, that's a relief.

James: You could easily nip back to shave.

Bill: From 165?

James: Yes.

Bill: What was I doing there?

James: (casually) My wife was in there. That's where you slept with her.¹⁴⁰

Bill denies both having been in Leeds the previous week and knowing James's wife. James asserts:

You do. You met her at ten o'clock last Friday in the lounge. You fell into conversation, you bought her a couple of drinks, you went upstairs together in the lift. In the lift you never took your eyes from her, you found you were both on the same floor, you helped her out, by her arm. You stood with her in the corridor, looking at her. You touched her shoulder, said goodnight, went to your room, she went to hers, you changed into your yellow pyjamas and black dressing gown, you went down the passage and knocked on her door, you'd left your toothpaste in town. She opened the door, you went in, she was still dressed. You admired the room, it was so feminine, you felt awake, didn't feel like sleeping, you sat down on the bed. She wanted you to go, you wouldn't . . . She became upset, you sympathized, away from home, on business, horrible life, especially for a woman, you comforted her, you gave her solace, you stayed.¹⁴¹

Enchanted with the minute detail, Bill asks for more: "Did she bite at all? . . . Scratch?"¹⁴² Upon learning that she scratched, Bill holds up his hand to show he has no scars. The two have vodka, argue over a spilled drink. From the floor where he has fallen during the argument, Bill tells what "really happened":

The truth . . . is that it never happened . . . what you said, anyway. I didn't know she was married. She never told me. Never said a word. But nothing of that . . . happened, I can assure you. All that happened was . . . you were right, actually, about going up in the lift . . . we . . . got out of the lift, and then suddenly she was in my arms. Really wasn't my fault, nothing was further from my mind, biggest surprise of my life, must have found me terribly attractive quite suddenly . . . anyway, we kissed a bit, only a few minutes, by the lift, no one about, and that was that . . . she went to her room . . . the rest of it just didn't happen.¹⁴³

The second view of the night in Leeds, Bill's view, becomes confused when James accepts it, but adds his own supplementary information, which Bill, in turn, accepts and enlarges upon:

James: And then about midnight you went into her private bathroom and had a bath. You sang "Coming through the Rye". You used her bath towel. Then you walked about the room with her bath towel, pretending you were a Roman.

Bill: Did I?

James: Then I phoned.

(Pause.)

I spoke to her. Asked her how she was. She said she was all right. Her voice was a little low. I asked her to speak up. She didn't have much to say. You were sitting on the bed next to her.

(Silence.)

Bill: Not sitting. Lying.¹⁴⁴

Stella gives to Harry (who comes to inquire about the events in Leeds because of his jealousy of Bill) a third version of the story:

Stella: I can't understand it . . . We've been happily married for two years, you see. I've been away before, you know . . . showing dresses, here and there, my husband runs the business. But it's never happened before.

Harry: What hasn't?

Stella: Well, that my husband has suddenly dreamed up such a fantastic story, for no reason at all.
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Harry then reports to James and Bill what he has learned from Stella in a fourth version of the night in Leeds: "What she confessed was . . . that she'd made the

whole thing up. She'd made the whole damn thing up. For some odd reason of her own. They never met, you see, Bill and your wife, they never even spoke."¹⁴⁶

Harry and James discuss Bill's stupidity in confirming the sordid story of the night in Leeds. They decide that what Stella needs is a long holiday. James apologizes to Bill for his wife's accusations, extends his hand to Bill in testimony of his good will. Bill does not extend his own hand back, but says, instead:

I never touched her . . . we sat . . . in the lounge, on a sofa . . . for two hours . . . talked . . . we talked about it . . . we didn't . . . move from the lounge . . . never went to her room . . . just talked . . . about what we would do . . . if we did get to her room . . . two hours . . . we never touched . . . we just talked about it . . .¹⁴⁷

The fifth (and final) version of the night in Leeds is neither confirmed nor denied by Stella as James pleads to know the "truth":

You didn't do anything, did you?

(Pause.)

He wasn't in your room. You just talked about it, in the lounge.

(Pause.)

That's the truth, isn't it?

(Pause.)

You just sat and talked about what you would do, if you went to your room. That's what you did.

(Pause.)

Didn't you?

(Pause.)

That's the truth . . . isn't it?¹⁴⁸

Stella merely looks at James, her expression friendly and full of sympathy.

What happened in Leeds is that Bill and Stella either were or were not there at the same time, either did or did not meet, either did or did not make physical love, either did or did not engage in the more erotic lovemaking Bill describes in the last moments of the play: mental and verbal conjecture.

Pinter has given his characters (and his audience) free reign with the "facts." What emerges from the play (rather than a solution to the "mystery at Leeds" or a situation of suspense about the mystery or a "true psychological insight" into the minds of the characters derived from their varying claims about the events) is a questioning of facts as facts: their truth, their import, their final relevance.

If the characters, Bill and Stella, were not in Leeds, but said that they had been and that they had made love, there exists, at least, a mental fact of love-making. If they were not there together, did not make love, but Stella's husband believed (or said that he believed) that they had made love, another mental fact of their lovemaking exists.

If physical and/or mental and verbal lovemaking

took place between the characters at Leeds and was later denied by the characters, the fact of denial negates the fact of the lovemaking to the degree (for each character) that the denial is believed.

The "facts" of the happening (or non-happening) at Leeds are ambiguous in their truth (the fact is, when the play is over, Bill and Stella both did and did not meet and make love at Leeds), in their import (the facts retain importance only as long as, and whenever, the characters cause them to be important), and in their final relevance (the facts have no relevance until their ambiguity is recognized.)

By causing the play to be only ambiguously factual, Pinter affirms matter with manner. The audience, as well as the characters, encounters:

. . . other objects just as impenetrable as we are, as we jockey for position in a swarming, footloose universe, the experience of never being certain what gesture any man may make next because every man is, at present, incomplete.¹⁴⁹

What happened or did not happen at Leeds is subordinate to what the characters will claim next about Leeds. The characters are never certain what the next claim will be or how it will be reported by another character. Nor does the audience know, until the end of the play, that the claims and counter-claims, augmented claims, and wrongly-reported claims are not meant to be mutually exclusive, that is, that one claim will not,

after all, "turn out to be true."

Thus, cruelty operates as both subject and form in The Collection insofar as Pinter has given existence free reign for the audience as well as for the characters.

Another way Pinter employs cruelty as both subject and form in The Collection, supplementary to and following necessarily from allowing existence free reign, is by constructing the play in such a way that the audience is forced to enter the specific state of mind of the playwright:

Pinter deprives us of our detachment . . . by taking us into the pattern. He does so by refusing to say what the pattern is, or by hinting very strongly that there is no pattern . . . we no longer judge-- we inhabit . . .¹⁵⁰

"Step into my parlor," Mr. Pinter says. We do, feeling like so many flies, wondering where the spider is.¹⁵¹

The audience, as well as Harry (who is driven by his infatuation for Bill) and James (who is driven by the same for Stella and, later, for Bill, too) suffers dread, anxiety, and anguish over Leeds. The audience suffers, however, not from the anxiety of not knowing what happened, but from a great agitation and unrest produced by Pinter's seeming to allow the characters free reign in "creating" a situation that has, supposedly, already happened.

If the playwright cannot determine a clear and simple origin or point of departure for the imaginations

of the characters, the audience, surely, cannot be expected to do so. If no clear origin exists, no clear solution exists either. If neither origin nor solution exist, no pattern exists.

Had Pinter allowed Stella's story of the night in Leeds to exist in any way except, as he does, through the claims of the other characters and through ambiguous remarks of her own, as: "That's a lie" and "I just . . . hoped you'd understand,"¹⁵² a recognizable pattern would have existed in The Collection. The varying claims of the other characters could have been measured against Stella's claim, however far it may have been from the truth.

Instead, when James tells Stella that Bill has entirely confirmed her story of the night in Leeds after he and Bill have just finished creating together the second version of events,¹⁵³ the audience can neither believe nor disbelieve what James says. Perhaps, in some miraculous, uncanny way, the story James and Bill concoct is Stella's story.

By rejecting the form of the "well-made mystery" (which always provides a point of reference for the audience), Pinter draws his audience into the very madness of his events. No character in the Pinter play understands (or portrays) the pattern through which he is moving. No member of the audience understands the pattern through which the characters are moving, until

abandoning intellectual probing of the play, he begins to understand that the play is, in fact, "in motion on a track that runs directly parallel to--or perhaps coincides entirely with--the track on which twentieth century man . . . [is] running."¹⁵⁴

CHAPTER VI

AUDIENCE RESPONSE

The Theater of the Absurd, to which the Pinter plays do not belong in spite of their being conveniently placed in that dramatic category more often than not, assumes a specific intellectual response from its audience: an appreciation for the meaninglessness of man's situation.

While the form of the drama of the absurd--an intentional abandonment of "reality" in plot and in character and a de-emphasis of conventional logical communication within the dialogue--is characteristic of the form of the Pinter play, its "purpose" is not.

The Pinter play does not posit the view that man's existence is senseless, devoid of purpose or ideals, in essence, absurd.

Unlike Eugene Ionesco's Rhinoceros, the Pinter play does not dehumanize or "monsterize" man. (Goldberg and McCann, in The Birthday Party, are always human beings though in an inhuman role.)

Unlike the characters in Ionesco's The Bald Soprano, Pinter's characters are not interchangeable in a loose

and mechanical way. (When the Matchseller usurps the place of the elderly husband in A Slight Ache, a significant action has taken place involving meaningful results for each character.)

Pinter does not "moralize" in the way of Ionesco, as Richard Schechner points out: "I . . . disagree with those who see in Pinter a protest against the dehumanization of contemporary man . . . He seems to me further from social protest than Ionesco or Genet, both of whom negatively posit a 'better world.'"¹⁵⁵

Schechner goes on to point out what he does find in the Pinter play:

If there is "meaning" in Pinter, it seems to me closely related to both Henry James and Kafka. James was most interested in probing the human psyche to its depths of confusion and fragmentary bases. Kafka was always telling stories in which his heroes had no sense of what was happening to them. Combine these two, and I think you have what Pinter seeks.¹⁵⁶

Schechner's dualistic definition of Pinter's "meaning" can be reduced to a single essence: mystery.

It is the unpredictability and the irrrationality of life, the "burden of the mysterious,"¹⁵⁷ that haunts and inspires Pinter. It is to these same things that the Pinter audience responds.

One might inquire how Pinter contains didactic comment, how he refrains (unlike other dramatists of the Theater of the Absurd and unlike many or all of the most recent American theatrical artists) from demanding, via his

drama, Paradise Now.¹⁵⁸

The answer is implicit in Pinter's world view.

Pinter's "burden of the mysterious" that is his own world view is a burden in the sense that it is a necessary rather than a contingent element of his drama. It is not a burden to Pinter in the same sense that his own world view is a burden to Ionesco, who longs to put aside (or avoid) the world where relationships are meaningless and man is an abstraction, the world of Ionesco's drama.

Pinter receives inspiration from rather than seeks to be separated from the "burden of the mysterious" that is, and has always been, an element of the best theater as well as an element of life.

As strange as it may seem when one recalls the persecution of Stanley Webber in The Birthday Party or the two characters waiting for their instructions to murder in The Dumb Waiter, Pinter does not hope (or want) to change the world through his drama or any other way.

To tamper with "things as they are" is a risk Pinter, who can imagine infinitely more horrible things, does not care to take. For example, Pinter has said: "I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid . . ." ¹⁵⁹ "More meaningful communication between people" is not something Pinter advocates when he portrays evasion of communication.

By refusing to write "message plays," Pinter

communicates to his audience another message, the "message of the mysterious."

Together with a feeling for the mystery of life, implicit in the Pinter play is gratuitousness. Pinter has said: "My responsibility is not to audiences, critics, producers, directors, actors or to my fellow men in general, but to the play in hand, simply."¹⁶⁰

The specific intellectual audience response assumed by the Pinter theater (as opposed to the response demanded by the Theater of the Absurd, an appreciation for the meaninglessness of man's situation) is, then, an appreciation of the play as a materialization of the mysterious.

The Pinter play is a kind of organized anarchy in which the anarchy controls the organization and the organization defines the anarchy. The audience responds to both aspects through an intellectual appreciation for the organization and an emotional reaction to the anarchy.

In a review of two Pinter short plays now Off-Broadway, Tea Party and The Basement, a critic from Time Magazine states: "Harold Pinter provokes a devilishly clever sort of participatory theater in which the playgoer is lured into playing detective without any clues."¹⁶¹ Pinter's view of the role of his audience is simpler: "Then it is up to the audience to decide how much is truth and how much is lies."¹⁶²

Is Pinter's audience response cunningly directed, as the Time critic contends, so that, finally, "the playgoer will see what he wants to see, which . . . is Harold Pinter's subtlest hold on him"¹⁶³ or is the audience left to make its own simple judgment of truth and falsehood as Pinter states?

The Time critic implies that the audience creates its own play in the manner of the victim of a parlor game, who creates the story he thinks the other players created in his absence by asking questions to which they answer simply "yes" or "no."

Pinter, on the other hand, implies that his audience has nothing to do with the creation of the plays, but merely judges a finished entity.

Neither idea is an accurate definition of the situation the Pinter audience finds itself to be in, which is a situation compounded of violent emotion--a creative shattering of the wall between itself and the dark reality--and, at the same moment, disinterested appreciation.

How does the audience allow itself two opposing reactions simultaneously? By acting in the same way that Pinter acted in allowing his own emotions (an apprehension of the dark reality) to operate in conjunction with artistic control (theatricality). The audience must, as Pinter does in writing the plays, unite feeling and intellect to the jeopardy of neither.

The audience must, while experiencing the profound effect of submission to the violent forces of Pinter's theater, reserve itself. It cannot, like the audience in "Aristotelian" theater (as defined by Bertolt Brecht), become emotionally involved in the characters and situations so that thought is obliterated.

The characters, Disson and Willy, in Tea Party, portray the two opposing approaches to life that must be combined by the audience in its response to the Pinter theater.

Disson, a middle-aged businessman (the business is the manufacture of bathroom appliances and a selection of these products, lit by hooded spotlights, decorates the office suite), hires a young secretary, who left her former job because her boss kept "touching" her, marries a beautiful, but aloof, young second wife, and takes his new brother-in-law, whom he has just met, into the business, all in the same week.

Disson tells his new secretary: " . . . this is quite a good week for me, what with one thing and another."¹⁶⁴

Immediately, Disson's "luck" begins to change. His best man becomes ill with the gastric flu and cannot make the speech in honor of the groom.

The brother-in-law-to-be, Willy, "all smooth and erased on the surface and God knows what underneath,"¹⁶⁵

comes to Disson's unfortunate rescue.

The speech in honor of the groom, which Willy makes at the wedding reception (and which, for Disson, was to have been a highlight of the marriage), is a celebration of the bride and the bride's parents rather than of the groom and the groom's parents.

When Disson's son begins addressing him as "sir" because "Uncle Willy called his father sir . . . He told me"¹⁶⁶ Disson's displeasure and his subsequent warning to Willy at the office: "There was a man in here, but I got rid of him"¹⁶⁷ indicate the form his particular tragedy will take.

As Disson becomes more and more hopelessly entangled in the intricacies of his life--his secretary baits him, sexually, until he is making the same sort of advances her former employer made, his wife and her brother enjoy a most unusual sibling relationship, if, indeed, they are siblings, his children are smarter than is comfortable for any father--and begins to lose himself in attacks of hysterical blindness, Willy coolly observes the disintegration.

When Disson falls to the floor like a stone at the tea party, which he gives for his friends and relatives to celebrate an impending trip to Spain, and cannot be extricated from his overturned chair, but lies in a catatonic state, his eyes open, unable or unwilling to

respond to the pleas of family and friends, Willy declares in active glee: "Anyone would think he was chained to it!"¹⁶⁸

Disson marries, loves, plans, sets and breaks standards and goals, falls, gropes, rises, suffers, loses, reacts; Willy baits and observes.

Disson is a glass vessel that changes color with each new ingredient; he is subject to all the stresses and strains life can inflict in addition to those his paranoid imagination creates.

Willy is the cool and icy ingredient that cracks the care-warmed vessel.

The Pinter audience must combine the attributes of the vessel which contains and the cooling liquid which cracks. Like the vessel, it should open itself completely and unreservedly to the emotional and metaphysical nuances of the play; like the cooling liquid, it should inflict critical pain.

At the moment of highest theatrical attainment, Artaud describes a philosophical sense "of the power which nature has of suddenly hurling everything into chaos."¹⁶⁹

Because the Pinter theater attempts this highest theatrical attainment, the Pinter audience must open itself to the effect as well as define the relative worth of the cause. The opening and the definition must be interdependent. To attempt to define the limits of Pinter's

theater without opening oneself to the effect of his poetry, for instance, or his view of the dark reality, is cerebral nonsense. To open oneself to Pinter's metaphysics without questioning his art is equally absurd.

That the Pinter plays happen in Artaudian territory, that mystery is Pinter's world view and the play its own justification, do not insure the success of a particular Pinter play.

The Basement, for instance, fails as an art form, as The Dwarfs fails, because of a problem involving the relative weight given by the playwright to content and form.

In The Dwarfs Pinter subordinates form to content so that, though there is much talk and a profuse selection of philosophical content, the lack of dramatic form, of a skeleton on which to hang the philosophical meat, mars the play.

Pinter does not bring his own ideas, in The Dwarfs, to sufficiently clear dramatic existence, though he claims, himself, to understand what is going on: "I know all the things [that] aren't said, and the way the characters actually look at each other, and what they mean by looking at each other."¹⁷⁰

The problem is reversed in The Basement, where content is too explicitly dramatized, form is as lacking

in mystery or depth as the luminous skeleton on a child's Halloween costume.

Upon confronting The Basement, a play termed "easy" and "too pat" and "obvious and tricky" by critics in Time Magazine and The New Yorker,¹⁷¹ the audience meets a fussy old-maidish bachelor, whose ornately furnished basement flat is invaded late one night by his former roommate with a girl friend.

The invaders immediately go to bed, later move in completely, replacing the host's ornate furnishings with Scandinavian tables and desks, Swedish glass.

As the action progresses, the girl is passed back and forth between the men (though the host is more interested in the former roommate than in any woman) during scenes at the beach, a cafe, and the flat. Changes of costume, music, and furniture accompany the mixed matchings.

Predictably, the final occupant of the flat is the roommate; the former host and the girl are the final invaders.

Pinter has dropped his "burden of the mysterious" in The Basement, perhaps because the reiteration of old themes (the usurper, sexual identity, cyclic occurrence) has become tiresome.

The interdependence of thought and feeling in the response of the Pinter audience is nowhere more evident than in the simultaneous failure of both in the apprehension

of The Basement.

Upon opening itself to the effect, the emotional and metaphysical nuances of the play, the audience finds:

Law: Listen. Listen. I must speak to you. I must speak frankly. Listen. Don't you think it's a bit crowded in that flat, for the three of us?

Stott: No, no. Not at all.

Law: Listen, listen. Stop walking. Stop walking. Please. Wait.

(Stott stops.)

Listen. Wouldn't you say that the flat is a little small, for three people?

Stott: No, no. Not at all.¹⁷²

Three people in a room, three people in a marriage, even, suddenly becomes as uninteresting, unmoving, and unmeaningful as three peas in a pod. Pinter, however, continues the tiresome exploration:

Law: (Following him.) To look at it another way, to look at it another way, I can assure you that the Council would object strenuously to three people living in these conditions. The Town Council, I know for a fact, would feel it incumbent upon itself to register the strongest possible objections. And so would the Church.

Stott: Not at all. Not at all.¹⁷³

The failure of effect defines the artistic limits of The Basement, inflicts the devastating critical pain.

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